

Times Argus

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Vermont leaders add to protest over ports

MONTPELIER — Vermont's congressional delegation and the state Senate have added their voices to the growing controversy surrounding the potential takeover of operations at major American ports by a United Arab Emirates company.

The deal — which would allow state-owned Dubai Ports World to take over operations at six ports from a publicly traded British company — has no direct impact on landlocked Vermont, but that hasn't stopped the state's politicians from lashing out at it.

On Thursday, the Vermont Senate passed a resolution supporting efforts in Congress to halt the \$6.8 billion deal.

"This legislative body supports ... efforts ... to halt, at least temporarily, Dubai Ports World's assumption of port operating contracts in the United States," the resolution said. "It is a matter of national security, second to none, that these ports remain secure at all times and not become vulnerable to terrorist infiltration."

The resolution was sponsored by 22 senators, including President Pro Tem Peter Welch, D-Windsor, who is running for Congress.

Before the Senate considered the resolution — which was sent to the Senate Committee on Government Operations — Welch's campaign issued its own criticism of the deal.

"Congress must do everything in its power to ensure our ports are secure," Welch said in the statement. "I share the concerns of many in Congress that this deal should not go through unless it fully supports guaranteeing the best port security possible."

Rep. Bernard Sanders, I-Vt., who Welch is seeking to replace, was much stronger in his appraisal of the deal.

"At a time when we are spending billions of dollars trying to prevent terrorist attacks against us, it is beyond comprehension that the Bush administration would OK a deal that would put the security of six major American ports into the hands of a Middle East country, the

United Arab Emirates, which, among many other concerns, is a nation from which two of the 9-11 hijackers came," Sanders said in his statement.

"It is bad enough that we are outsourcing millions of good paying jobs," he added. "It is totally absurd to outsource the very security of our country."

Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., whose retirement this year creates an open seat that Sanders is seeking, was less forceful in his response to the deal, which is receiving widespread, bipartisan criticism.

"The United Arab Emirates is one of our closest allies in the Middle East," Jeffords said. "If the case can be made that security will suffer, then this change of terminal operators should not go forward. But to this point, I've seen more guilt by association than real evidence. With our security almost as dependent on what happens at foreign ports as our own, we have no choice but to cooperate with our trading partners."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont, a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee's Homeland Security Subcommittee, said he was alarmed at the deal itself and how the federal government came to approve it.

"The administration should have recognized that an unprecedented sale of this size and scope requires extraordinary precautions to ensure that appropriate security safeguards are in place at all of our ports," Leahy said. "Instead, they rushed through and rubber-stamped a secret review, and now they once again ask us to trust their vague assurances that adequate national security arrangements are in place."